Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 21

Butterfly Kisses

Interval

Chapter: 128

Olivia- story’s

Part: 1

Some photos of Neveah growing up… look through them… ≈ Past remembers ≈

They say you fall in love only once but every time I see her I fall in love with her all over again and again. He said to me and I feel too that like any girl, even if I was not sure, about boys. Randy Zeirud after that I relax.

I’m even glad for the silence.

Sometimes, I feel like if you just watch things, just sit still and let the world exist in front of you- sometimes I swear that just for a second time freeze and the world pauses in its tilt. Just for a second. In addition, if you somehow found a way to live in that second, then you would live forever.

I do the unthinkable and start dating a boy- going out,’ I say.

Younger than me, lovely, but not cool.

Throwing yet another seashell in a high arc movement, and it just hits the disruption.

~*~

We have to countenance ourselves to be treasured by the individuals who love us, the people who matter. Too much of the time, we are blinded by our chases of people to love us, individuals that don't even matter, while all that time we waste and the general public who do darling us have to stand on the footway and watch us beg in the streets! It's time to put an

end to this. It's time for us to let ourselves be prized.

~*~

‘I know.’ The ocean is leaving a litter of pulpy green seaweed, twigs, and scrabbling hermit crabs in its wake, and the air smells tangy with salt and fish. A seagull pecks its way across the beach, blinking, leaving tiny thatched claw prints. ‘My mom used to bring me here when I was little. We’d walk out a little bit at low tide-as far as you can go, anyway. Crazy stuff gets stranded on the sand-horseshoe crabs

and giant clams and sea anemone. Just gets left behind when the water goes out. She taught me to swim here too.’ I’m not sure why the words bubble out of me then, why I have the sudden urge to talk.

‘My sister used to stay on the shore and build sandcastles, and we would pretend that they were real cities like we’d swum to the other side of the world, to the uncured places. Except in our games, they weren't diseased at all, or destroyed, or horrible. They were beautiful and

peaceful, and built of glass and light and things.’

Randy stays silent, tracing shapes in the sand with a finger. But I can tell he’s listening.

The words tumble on: ‘I remember my mom would bounce me in the water on her hip. And then one time she just let me go. I mean, not for real -real. I had those little inflatable thingies on my arms. But I was so scared I started bawling my head off. I was only a few years old, but I remember it, I swear I do.

I was so relieved when she scooped me back up. But disappointed, too. Like I'd lost the chance at something great, you know?'

'So, what happened?' Randy tips his head to look at me. 'You don't come here anymore? Your mom loses her taste for the ocean?' I look away, toward the horizon. The bay is relatively calm today. Flat, all shades of blue and purple as it draws away from the beach with a low sucking sound. Harmless. 'She died,' I say, surprised by how difficult it is to say.

He is quite next to me and I rush on,

‘She killed herself. When I was six.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, so low and quiet

I almost miss it.

‘My dad died when I was eight months old. I don’t remember him at all. I think -I think it kind of broke her, you know?

My mom, I mean. She wasn’t cured. It didn’t work. I don’t know why.

She had the procedure three separate times, but it didn't - it didn't fix her.' I pause, sucking in a breath, afraid to look at him, who is as still and soundless next to me as like a statue, like a carved piece of shadow. Still, I can't stop speaking.

I realize, strangely, that I've never told the story of my mother before. I've never had to. Everyone around me, everyone in the school, all my neighbors, and my aunts' friends- they all knew about my family already, and my family's disgraceful secrets.

That’s why they always looked at me pityingly, from the corner of their eyes.

That’s why for years I rode a wave of whispering into every room, was slapped with sudden silence when I entered-silence and guilty, startled faces.

Even before she and I were desk partners in second grade.

I remember because she found me in the bathroom stall, crying into a piece of paper towel, stuffing my mouth with it so no one would hear, and she kicked the door right open with a foot

and stood there staring. Is it because of your mom? she said the first words she ever spoke to me.

‘I didn’t know there was something wrong with her. I didn’t know she was sick. I was too young to understand.’ I keep my eyes focused on the horizon, a solid thin line, taut as a tightrope. The bay edges farther from us, and as always- I have the same fantasy I did as a child: that maybe it won’t come back, maybe the whole ocean will disappear forever, drawn back across the surface of the earth

like lips retracting over teeth, revealing the cool, white hardness underneath, the bleached bone. ‘If I had known, maybe I could have-’

At the last second my voice falters and I can’t say any more, can’t finish the sentence. Maybe I could have stopped it. It’s a sentence I’ve never spoken before, never even allowed myself to think. But the idea is there, looming up solid and unavoidable, a sheer rock face: I could have stopped it. I should have stopped it.

We sit in silence. At some point during my story, the mother and child must have packed up and gone home; Alex and I are all alone on the beach. Now that the words aren't bubbling, rushing out of me, I can't believe how much I've shared with a next- to- perfect stranger- and a boy, no less. I'm suddenly itching, squirming- embarrassed. I'm desperate for something else to say- something harmless, about the tide or the weather but, as usual, my mind goes blank now that I need it to function. I'm afraid to look at her now, my old lover.

When I finally work up the courage to shoot him a tiny sidelong glance, he’s sitting, staring out at the bay. His face is completely unreadable except for a tiny muscle, which flutters in and out at the base of his jaw. My heart sinks… just like I feared- he's ashamed of me now, disgusted by my family’s history, by the disease that runs in my blood. At any second, he’ll stand up and tell me it’s better if he doesn’t speak to me anymore.

It’s weird… I don’t even really know…

She or him, and there's an impassable divide between us, but the idea upsets me anyway.

I'm two seconds away from jumping up and running away, just so I won't have to nod and pretend to understand when he turns to me and says, Listen, Lena. I'm sorry, but - and gives me that all-too-familiar look.

(Last year there was a rabid dog loose on the Hill, biting and snapping at everyone, frothing at the mouth. It was half-starved, mangy, he- and like her missing one leg, but still it

took two cops to shoot it down. A crowd gathered to watch, and I was there. I stopped on the way back from my run. For the first time in my life, I understood the look that people had been giving me forever, the same curl of the lip whenever they hear the name Maddie, yes-but disgust, also, and fear of contamination. It was the same way they were looking at the dog while he circled and snapped and spit, and then a mass exhalation of relief when the third bullet finally took him down and he stopped twitching.)

Just when I think I can't take it anymore; he reaches over and barely skims my elbow with one finger.

'I'll race you,' he says, standing up and beating the sand off his shorts. He spreads a hand out to me and helps me up, a smile flickering back on his face.

I'm endlessly grateful to him for that second. He's not going to hold my family's past against me. He doesn't think I'm dirty or damaged. He pulls me to my feet, and I think he squeezes my hand once I'm standing, a quick

pulse, and I’m startled and happy, thinking of my secret sign with Hanna.

‘Only if you’ve got a thing for total humiliation,’ I say…

He raises his eyebrows… ‘So-o, you think you can beat me?’

‘I don’t think, I know…’

‘We’ll see about that.’ she cocks his head to the side. ‘First one to the buoys, then?’

That throws me. The tide doesn’t go out too far in the bay; the

buoys are still floating on at least four feet of water.

‘You want to race into the bay?’

‘Scared?’ He asks, grinning.

‘I’m not scared, I’m just-’

‘Good.’ He reaches out and brushes my shoulder with two fingers. ‘Then how about a little less conversation, and a little more-Go!’ He screams out the last word and takes off at full speed. It takes me two whole seconds to launch myself after him, and I’m calling out, ‘No fair! I wasn’t ready!’ and both of us are laughing as we splash through the

shallows in our clothes, the little ripples, and dips of the ocean floor now exposed by the tide’s retreat. Shells crunch under my feet.

I get my toe caught in a tangle of red and purple seaweed and nearly do a face plant.

I push myself off the wet sand with a palm and get my balance again, have almost caught up to Randy, when he drops down in a way- and scoops up a handful of wet sand, whirling around to peg me with it.

I shriek and duck out of the way, but a bit of it still catches me on the cheek, dribbling down my neck.

‘You are such a cheater!’ I manage to gasp, out of breath from running and laughing.

‘You can’t cheat if there are no rules,’ Alex shoots back over his shoulder.

‘No rules, hum?’ We’re wallowing shin-deep now and I start palming water at him, making a splatter pattern over his back and shoulders. He turns around, sweeping

his arm across the surface of the water, a glittering arc. I twist to avoid it and end up slipping and falling elbow deep, soaking my shorts and the bottom half of my T-shirt, the impulsive cold making me gasp. He’s still slogging forward, his head craned back, his smile dazzling, his laugh rolling off and away so loud I imagine it dipping past Great Diamond Island and over the horizon, reaching to other parts of the world. I scramble up and haul after him.

The buoys are bobbing twenty feet ahead of us and the water is at my knees, and then my thighs, and then to my waist, until both of us are half running and half swimming, frantically paddling forward with our arms. I can’t breathe or think or do anything but laugh and splash and focus on the bright red bobbing buoys, focus on winning, winning, I have to win, and when we’re only a few feet away and he’s still in the lead and my shoes are leaden and filled with water, my clothes dragging me down like my pockets have been weighed with stones,

without thinking I leap forward and tackle him, wrestling down into the water, feeling my foot connect with his thigh as I rocket off of him and reach out to slap the nearest buoy, the plastic shooting away from my hand when, I hit it. We must be a quarter-mile off the beach, but the tide’s still going out, so I can stand, the water hitting me in my chest.

Part: 2

He reached for her hand. She jerked her head up, eyes wide. ‘Stay,’ he repeated. ‘I could use the company.’

She hesitated. A rueful smile pulled at his lips. ‘I promise I won’t try to kiss you again… tonight. I raise my arms triumphantly as Ray comes up spluttering water, shaking his head so water pinwheels from his hair.

~*~

‘Don’t stop, please,’ You're so fucking beautiful when you come on me,’ he said, cupping her face, nuzzling her mouth.

Kissing him longer, unwilling to let him go.

This is what I want; this is what I've wanted since his damn phone interrupted us this morning, his mouth, his body claiming mine. 'Now turn around and bend over. I need to ride you.' His forehead pressed to mine as we gasped together, the cold air barely cooling the heat raging between us. Tate opened her eyes, and let out a wobbly giggle. 'Bend over the bed? It goes in and out of me, and it drips on my back his gift to me. After being on my feet the whole night? I don't think so, buddy.

Now,’ he said- as he lifted her left my leg and spared, we wide open showing my slight, hooked his elbow under her knee, and entered her- I’m on fire, every muscle in my body attuned to his, my groin clenching with delicious need. When the voices grow louder his hold loosens.

I beg into his mouth.

Diving into me once more his tongue slays me, erases every thought of the outside world until the passion has left us breathless and we have to break away if only to live. He opens up

wide and I squirt it in… and he loves me for it so hard and fast after, the- comes and comes again.

Maddie- I missed talking to you, and playing with you, and touching you, and seeing you smile. I missed just … sitting next to you. I've never missed anyone or anything that much.

Yet- I am fucking him hard now with her in my mind doing the same. I still love her, yet not move him.

~*~

(Things we did)

‘I won,’ I pant- it out.

‘You cheated,’ he says, pushing forward a few more steps and collapsing with both arms behind him, looped over the rope stringing along the buoys. He arches his back, so his face is tilted up toward the sky. His T-shirt is completely soaked, and water beads off his eyelashes trickle down his cheeks.

‘No rules,’ I say, ‘so no cheating.’

He turns to me, grinning. ‘I let you win, then.’

‘Yeah, right.’

I splash him a little and he holds up his hands, surrendering.

‘You’re just a sore loser.’

‘I don’t have much practice at it.’

There’s that confidence again, that semi-infuriating easiness of his, the tilt of his head and the smile. But today it’s not infuriating. Today I like it, feel like it’s somehow rubbing off on me like if I was around him enough, I

would never feel awkward or frightened or insecure.

‘Whatever.’

I roll my eyes and hook one arm over the buoys next to him, enjoying the feel of the currents swishing around my chest, enjoying the strangeness of being in the bay with my clothes on, the stickiness of my T-shirt, and the sucking of my shoes on my feet. Soon the tide will turn, and the water will come in again. Then it will be a slow, exhausting swim back to the beach.

Even if a girl is gay- like I was she still might just love a boy too, it was all for a boy breaking her heart that she turns that ways and turned away.

Part: 3

On the other hand, I don’t care. I don’t care about anything-I’m not worried about how in a million years I’ll explain to Liz why I’ve come home soaking wet, with seaweed clinging to my back and the smell of salt in my hair, not worried about how long I have until curfew or why Randy is even

being nice to me. I’m just happy, a pure, bubbly feeling.

Beyond the buoys the bay is dark purple, the waves brushed over with whitecaps.

It is illegal to go beyond the buoys- beyond the buoys are the islands and the lookout points, and beyond them is the open ocean, the ocean that leads to unregulated places, places of disease and fear-but for that moment- I fantasize about ducking underneath the rope and swimming out.

To our left, we can see the bright white silhouette of the lab complex and beyond it, distantly, Old Haven, all the docks like gigantic wooden centipedes. To our right is a covered bridge, and the long string of guard huts that runs its length and continues up along the border catches me looking.

‘Pretty, isn’t it?’ he says.

The bridge is mottled gray-green, all coated in backsplash and algae, and it looks like it’s leaning slightly into the wind. I wrinkle my

nose. ‘It looks kind of like it’s rotting, doesn’t it?

Part: 4

My sister always said that someday it would fall into the ocean, just topple right over.’ Randy laughs. ‘I wasn’t talking about the bridge.’ He tilts his chin just slightly, gesturing. ‘I meant past the bridge.’ He pauses for just a fraction of a second. ‘I meant the Wilds.’

Beyond the bridge is the northern border, located along the far side of Black and Gold Cove. As we’re

standing there the lights in the guard huts click on, one after another, shining out against the deepening blue sky- a sign that it’s getting late and I should be going home soon. Still, I can’t force myself to leave, even as I feel the water around my chest start to bubble and eddy, the tide turning.

Beyond the bridge, the lush greens of the Wilds move together in the wind like an endlessly re-arranging wall, a thick wedge of green cutting down toward the bay, and separating Pitt.

From here we can just make out the barest section of it, an empty place marked with no lights, no boats, no buildings: impenetrable and strange and black. But I know that the wilderness extends back, going on for miles and miles and miles all through the mainland, all across the country, like a monster reaching its tentacles around the civilized parts of the world.

Maybe it was the race or beating him to the buoys, or the fact that he didn’t criticize me or my family when I told him about my mother, but

at that moment the giddiness and happiness are still flowing strong and I feel like I could tell Randy anything, ask him anything. So, I say, ‘Can I tell you a secret?’ I don’t wait for him to answer; I don’t have to and knowing that makes me feel dizzy and careless. ‘I used to think about it a lot. The Wilds, I mean, and what they were like - and the Invalids, whether they existed.’ Out of the corner of my eye, I think I see him flinch slightly, so I press on, ‘I used to sometimes think - I used to pretend that maybe my mom didn’t die, you know? Maybe she’d only run

away to the Wilds. Not that that would be any better. I guess I just didn't want her to be gone for good. It was better to imagine her out there somewhere, singing.' I break off, shaking my head, amazed that I feel so comfortable talking to Randy. Amazed, and grateful. 'What about you?' I say.

'What about me?' Ray is watching me with an expression I can't read. Like I've hurt him, almost, but that doesn't make any sense.

‘Did you used to think about going to the Wilds when you were little? Just for fun, I mean, like a game.’

Alex squints, looks away from me, and grimaces. ‘Yeah, sure. A lot.’ He reaches out and slaps the buoys. ‘None of these. No walls to run into. No eyes.

Freedom and space to stretch out. I still think about the Wilds.’

I stare at him. Nobody uses words like that anymore: freedom, space. Old words. ‘Still? Even after this?’

Liz looks hot in a swimsuit; I see her without the top and I want her not him.

Without meaning to or thinking about it I reach out and brush my fingers, once, against the three-pronged scar on his neck.

He jerks away from my touch as though I've scalded him, and I drop my hand, embarrassed.

'Liz -' he says, in the strangest voice: like my name is a sour thing, a word that tastes bad in his mouth.

I know I shouldn’t have touched him like that. I’ve overstepped my boundaries, and he’s going to remind me of it, of what it means to be uncured. I think I will die of humiliation if he starts to lecture me, so to cover the discomfort I start babbling. ‘Most curds don’t think about that kind of stuff. -She always said it was a waste of time. She always said there was nothing out there but animals and land and bugs, that all the talk of Invalids was make-believe stuff, kid stuff. She said believing in Invalids is the same

thing as believing in necromancers or fallen angels.

Remember how people used to say there were fallen angels in the Wilds?' she smiles, but it's more like a wince. 'Liz, I have to tell you something.' Her voice is a little stronger now, but something about his tone makes me afraid to let him speak.

Now I can't stop talking. 'Did it hurt?

The procedure, I mean.

My sister said it was no big deal, not with all the painkillers they give you, but my cousin Marcia used to say it was worse than anything, worse than having a baby, even though her second kid took, like, fifteen hours to deliver-' I break off, blushing, mentally cursing myself for the ridiculous conversational turn.

I wish I could rewind to last night's party when my brain was coming up empty; it's like I've been saving up for a case of verbal vomit. 'I'm not scared, though,' I nearly

screamed, as she again opened her mouth to speak. I'm desperate to salvage the situation somehow. 'My procedure's coming up. Seventy days. It's dorky, huh?

That I count. But I can't wait.'

I may fall to another girl that day.

'Liz.' Randy's voice is stronger, more forceful now, and it finally stops me. He turns so that we're face-to-face. At that moment my shoes skim off the sand bottom, and I realize that the water is lapping up to my neck. The

tide is coming in fast. ‘Listen to me. I’m not who-I’m not who you think I am.’

I have to fight to stand. All of a sudden, the currents tug and pull at me. It’s always seemed this way. The tide goes out a slow drain, comes back in a rush.

‘What do you mean?’

His eyes-shifting gold, amber, an animal’s eyes-search my face, and without knowing why I’m scared again.

‘I was never cured,’ he says. For a moment I close my eyes and

imagine I've misheard him, imagine I've only confused the shushing of the waves for his voice. But when I open my eyes he's still standing there, staring at me, looking guilty and something else-sad, maybe? …And I know I heard correctly.

He says, 'I never had the procedure.'

'You mean it didn't work?' I say. My body is tingling, going numb, and I realize then how cold it is. 'You had the procedure and it didn't work? Like what happened to my mom?'

‘Nope, Liz. I’ He looks away, squinting, says under his breath, ‘I don’t know how to explain.’

Part: 5

Everything from the tips of my fingers through the roots of my hair now feels as if it’s encased in ice. Disconnected images run through my head, a skipping movie reel: Randy standing on the observation deck, his hair like a crown of leaves; turning his head, showing the neat four-split scar just beneath his left ear; reaching out to me and saying, I’m safe. I won’t hurt

you. The words start rattling out of me again, but I don't feel them, hardly feel anything. 'It didn't work, and you've been lying about it.

Dishonest so you could still go to school, still get a job, still get paired and matched, and everything. But you're not-you're still-you might still be-' I can't bring myself to say the word. Diseased. Uncured, sick, I feel like I'll be sick.

~*~

Me- a school day- 'I hope I didn't disturb anything.'

‘You didn’t.’ My cheeks are hot. I wish I could reach out and take my stupid bra-pink, with patterns of daisies on it, like a teen or under- bra-and shove it under the sofa, but that would be even more conspicuous. So instead we both pretend we don’t notice.

‘Okay…’ Maddie draws out the word, super long as if she knows I’m lying. For a second he says nothing. Then, slowly, he comes down the stairs, edging closer, as if I’m an animal who might be rabid.

‘Are you, all right? You seem-’

‘I see what?’ I look up at him then, experiencing a hot flash of anger.

‘Nothing.’ He stops again, a good ten feet away from me. ‘I don’t know.

Upset… angry or something.’ His next words he pronounces very carefully as if each one is glass that might shatter in his mouth. ‘Is everything okay with you?’ I feel stupid sitting on the couch when he’s standing, like I’m at a disadvantage somehow, so I stand up, too, crossing my arms. ‘We’re fine,’ I say. ‘I’m fine.’

I'd been planning on telling Maddie about the breakup-the second I saw his stupid stuff on the stairs, I knew I would tell him, and maybe even tell him why, cry and confess that there's something wrong with me and I don't know how to be happy and I'm an idiot, such an idiot.

But now I can't tell him. I won't.

Then I say, 'her sister is not home.' Maddie flinches and turns away, a muscle working in his jaw. Even in midwinter, he has the kind of skin that

always looks tan. I wish he looked worse. I wish he looked as bad as I feel. ‘Well, you’re here for her, aren’t you?’

Maddie- ‘Jesus, Liv.’ She turns back to me then. ‘We need to - I don’t know - fix this. Fix us.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ I say, squeezing my ribs hard. I feel like if I don’t, I might just come apart.

‘You do know what I mean,’ he says. ‘You are-where-my best friend.’

With one hand, he gestures to space between us, the long stretch of

the basement, where for years we built pillow forts and competed to see who could withstand tickle wars the longest. ‘What happened?’

Liv- ‘What happened is you started dating one more time- it’s on and off…

My sister,’ I say. The words come out louder than I intended.

Parker takes a step toward me. ‘I didn’t mean to hurt you,’ he says, his voice quiet, and for a second, I want to close the distance between us and bury myself in the soft place between his

arm and shoulder blade, and tell her how dumb I've been, and let him cheer me up with bad renditions songs and weird trivia about the world's largest hamburgers or freestanding structures built entirely from toothpicks.

'I didn't mean to hurt either of you. It just - happened.' He's practically whispering now. 'I'm trying to stop it.'

I take a step backward. 'You're not trying very hard,' I say. I know I'm being a bitch, but I don't care. He's the one who ruined everything.

Edward- He’s the one who kissed her, who keeps kissing her, and I don't like it she is my girl- mine. Who keeps telling her yes, no matter how many times they break up? ‘I’ll let her know you came by.’

Maddie’s face changes. And at that moment, I know I’ve hurt him, maybe just as much as he’s hurt me. I get a sick rush of triumph that feels virtually like seasickness, like catching an insect between folds of the paper towel and embracing.

Part: 6

Then he just- looks angry- hard, almost, like his skin has suddenly tightened into stone.

‘Yeah, all right.’ He takes two steps backward before spinning around. ‘Tell her I’m looking for her. Tell her I’m worried about her.’

~*~

‘Sure…’ My voice sounds unacquainted as if it’s being piped in from somewhere a thousand miles away. I broke up with Kristy. And for what? Maddie and I aren’t even friends anymore, yet we say that all the time-

not true. I've screwed up everything. Suddenly I think I might be sick.

'Oh, and Kristy?' Maddie pauses at the foot of the stairs. Her expression is impossible to read for a second, I think he might try and apologize again. 'Your shirt's on inside out.'

Then he's gone, sprinting up the stairs, leaving me alone.

~*~

'No,' Maddie's voice is so loud it startles me. I take a step back,

sneakers slipping on the slick and uneven bottom of the ocean floor, and nearly go under, but when Maddie makes a move to touch me, I jerk backward, out of his reach.

Something hardens in her face like he's made a decision. 'I'm telling you I was never cured. Never paired or matched or anything. I was never even evaluated.'

'Impossible.' The word barely squeezes itself out, a murmur. The sky is whirling above me, all blues and

pinks and reds twirling together until it looks like parts of the sky are wringing.

Part: 7

I/we girls should know we are beautiful just the way we are… ‘We don’t need to change a thing; the world could change its heart. No scars to your beauty, we're stars and we're beautiful, and you don't have to change a thing, the world could change its heart. No scars to your beauty, we're stars and we're beautiful. She has dreams to be envious, so she's starving. You know, cover girls eat nothing.

She says beauty is pain and there's beauty in everything. What's a little bit of hunger? I could go a little while longer, she fades away- she doesn't see her perfect, she doesn't understand she's worth it… Or that beauty goes deeper than the surface ‘Impossible.’ -Scars to Your Beautiful by Alessia Cara …has the song of a teen girl’s life…

‘You have the scars.’ ‘Scars,’ he corrects me, a little more gently. ‘Just scars. Not the scars.’ He looks away then, giving me a view of his neck.

‘Three tiny scars, an inverted triangle. Easy to replicate. With a scalpel, a penknife, anything.’

I close my eyes again. The waves swell around me and the motion, the lift, and the drop convince me I really will throw up, right here in the water. I choke down the feeling, trying to hold back the realization that is battering at the back of my mind, threatening to overwhelm me -fighting back the feeling of drowning.

I open my eyes and croak out, ‘How-?’

‘You have to understand. Lena, I’m trusting you. Do you see that?’ He’s staring at me so intently I can feel his eyes like touch, and I keep my eyes averted. ‘I didn’t mean to-I didn’t want to lie to you.’

‘How?’ I repeat, louder now.

Somehow my brain gets stuck on the word lie and makes an endless loop: No way to avoid evaluations unless you lie.

No way to avoid procedure unless you lie. You must lie.

For a moment, Maddie is silent, and I think he's going to chicken out, refusing to tell me anything more. I almost wish he would. I'm desperate to rewind time, go back to the moment before he said my name in that strange tone of voice, go back to the triumphant, surging feeling of beating him to the buoys. We'll race back to the beach. We'll meet up tomorrow, and try to wheedle some fresh crabs from the fishermen at the dock.

But then he speaks. 'I'm not from here,' he says. 'I mean, I wasn't

born in Pittsburgh. Not exactly.' He's speaking in the tone of voice that everyone uses when they're about to break you apart.

Gentle-kind, even-like they can make the news sound better just by speaking in a lullaby voice. I'm sorry, Liv, but your mother was a troubled girl.

Like you won't somehow hear the violence underneath.

'Where are you from?' I don't have to ask. I know already.

The comprehension has broken, spilled, swarming me. But a slight part of me believes that as long as he doesn’t say it, it’s not factual.

~*~

Her eyes are steady on mine, but he tilts his head back toward the border, beyond the bridge, to that endlessly moving preparation of branches and leaves and vines and tangled, growing things.

‘There,’ she says, or maybe I just think she says it. His lips barely move. But the meaning is clear.

He comes from the wilderness.

‘An Invalid,’ I say. The word feels like it’s grating against my throat.

‘You’re an Invalid.’ I’m giving him a final chance to deny it.

But he doesn’t. He just winces slightly and says, ‘I’ve always hated that word.’

Standing there, I comprehend something else: that it wasn’t a coincidence whenever Liv made fun of me for still believing in the Invalids, whenever she would shake her head

without bothering to look up from her knitting needlestick, tick, tick, they went together, flashing metal-and say, ‘I presume you have faith in fallen and witches, too?’ They suck! It’s like the movie- love it or love to hate it, that’s us.

Fallen-angels and wizards and Invalids: things that will tear into you, tear you to shreds. Deadly things.

I’m suddenly so frightened a desperate pressure starts pushing down in the bottom of my stomach and between my legs, and for one wild and

ridiculous second, I’m positive that I’m about to pee.

The lighthouse on Little Island clicks on out in the outer parts, not in the city, cuts a wide swath across the water, an enormous, accusatory finger: I’m terrified I’ll get caught up in its beam, terrified it will point in my direction and then I’ll overhear the whirling of the state helicopters and the megaphone voices of the regulators shouting, ‘Illegal activity! Illegal activity!’ The beach looks hopelessly and impossibly remote. I can’t imagine

how we got out so far. My arms feel heavy and useless, and I think of my mother, and her jacket filling slowly with water.

I take deep breaths, trying to keep my mind from spinning, trying to focus.

There’s no way for anyone to know that Alex is an Invalid. I didn’t know. He looks normal and has the scar in the right place. There’s no way anyone could have heard us talking.

A wave lifts- and breaks against my back. I blunder forward.

Maddie reaches out and grabs my arm to steady me, but I twist away from him just as the second round of waves surges over us. I get a mouthful of seawater, feel the salt stinging my eyes, and am momentarily blinded.

'Don't,' I stutter. 'Don't you dare touch me?'

'Liv, I swear. I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't want to lie to you.'
'Why are you doing this?' I can't think straight, I can hardly even breathe. 'What do you want from me?'

‘Want…?’ she shakes his head. She looks honestly confused-and offended, too, as though I’m the one who did something wrong. Aimed at a second, I feel a flash of sympathy for him. Maybe she sees it on my face, that segment of a second when I let my guard down because at that moment his expression softens, and his eyes go bright as flame, and even though I barely see him move, suddenly he has closed the space between us and he’s wrapping his warm hands over my shoulders-fingers so warm and strong I almost cry out-and saying, ‘Lena. I like

you, okay? That's it. That's all… I like you.'

His voice is so low and hypnotic it reminds me of a song. I think of predators dropping silently from trees: I think of enormous cats with glowing amber eyes, just like him.

And then I'm stumbling backward, paddling away from him, my shirt and shoes heavy with water, my heart hammering painfully against my chest and my breath rasping in my throat. I'm kicking off the ground and sweeping forward with my arms, half

running, half swimming, as the tide lifts and drags at me so I feel like I can only creep forward an inch at a time, so I feel like I'm moving through molasses. Alex calls my name, but I'm too afraid to turn my head and see if he's coming after me. It's like one of those nightmares where something's chasing you but you're too afraid to look and see what it is. All you hear is its breath, getting closer and closer.

You feel its shadow forthcoming up behind you, but you're paralyzed: You know that any second,

you'll feel its icy fingers closing on your neck.

I'll never make it, I think. I'll never make it back. Something scrapes across my shin and I begin to imagine that the bay around me is full of horrible underwater things, sharks and jellyfish and poisonous eels, and even though I know I'm panicking I feel like falling backward and giving up. The beach is still so far, and my arms and legs feel so heavy.

Her voice gets whipped away by the wind, sounding fainter and

fainter, and when I finally work up the courage to look over my shoulder, I see him bobbing up and down by the buoys. I realize I've gone farther than I thought, and at the very least she isn't following me. My fear eases up, and the knot in my chest loosens.

The next wave is so strong it helps skim me over a steep underwater ridge, drops me to my knees into the soft sand. When I struggle to my feet the water hits me just at the waist, and I slosh the rest of the way to shore, shivering, grateful, exhausted.

My thighs are shaking. I collapse onto the beach, gasping and coughing. From the flames of color licking across the sky over Back and Gold Cove-orange, reds, pinks- I’m guessing it’s close to sunset, probably around eight o’clock. Part of me wants to just lie down, spread my arms and stretch out, and sleep all through the night. I feel like I’ve swallowed half my weight in saltwater.

My skin stings and there’s sand everywhere, in my bra and underwear and between my toes and under my

fingernails. Whatever scraped my shin in the water left its mark: a long trickle of blood snakes around my calf.

I look up, and for one panicked second, I can't find Maddie by the buoys. My heart stops. Then I see him, a dark spot cutting quickly through the water. His arms pinwheel gracefully as he swims. He's fast. I haul myself to my feet, grab my shoes, and limp up to my bike. My legs are so weak it takes me a minute to find my balance, and at first, I weave crazily up and down the road like a toddler just learning to ride.

I don’t look back, not once, until I’m at my gate. By then the streets are empty and quiet, night about to fall, curfew about to come down like a giant whole-hearted embrace, keeping us all in our places, keeping us all innocuous.

Part: 8

Olivia- Think of it this way: When it’s cold outside and your teeth are chattering, you bundle up in a winter coat, and scarves, and mittens, to keep from catching the flu. Well, the borders are like hats and scarves and winter coats for the whole country!

They keep the very worst disease away, so we can all stay healthy!

After the borders went up, the president and the Consortium had one last thing to take care of before we could all be safe and happy.

(Back)

She cried all the time, and once she confessed to me that when I liked to kiss her tears away. Still, now, when I think of that day's-I, was only eight at the time I think of the taste of salt.

The disease slowly worked its way deeper and deeper inside of her, an animal chewing her from within. My sister couldn't eat. What little we could convince her to swallow came up just as quickly, and I was afraid for her life. Thomas broke her heart, of course, to nobody's surprise.

~*~

Then my sister did nothing but lie in bed and watch the shadows shift slowly across the walls, her ribs rising under her pale skin like wood rising through water. Even then she refused

the procedure and the comfort it would give her, and on the day the cure was to be administered it took four scientists and several needles full of tranquilizer before she would submit, before she would stop scratching with her long, sharp nails, which had gone uncut for weeks, and screaming and cursing and calling for Thomas. I watched them come for her, to bring her to the labs; I sat in a corner, terrified, while she spits, hissed, and kicked, and I thought of my mom and dad.

That afternoon, though I was still more than a decade away from safety, I began to count the months until my procedure. In the end, my sister was cured. She came back to me gentle and content, her nails spotless and round, her hair pulled back in a long, thick braid.

Several months later she was pledged to an IT tech, roughly her age, and several weeks after she graduated from college they married, their hands linked loosely under the canopy, both of them staring straight ahead as though

at a future of days unmarred by worry or discontent or disagreement, a future of identical days, like a series of neatly blown bubbles.

Thomas was cured too. She was married to Ella, once my sister's best friend, and now everybody is happy. Rachel told me a few months ago that the two couples often see each other at picnics and neighborhood events since they live fairly close to each other in the East End.

The four of them sit, making polite and quiet conversation, with not

a sole flicker of the past to disturb the stillness and completeness of the present.

That’s the beauty of the cure. No one mentions those lost, hot days in the field when Thomas kissed Rachel’s tears away and invented worlds just, so he could promise them to her when she tore the skin off her arms at the thought of living without him. I’m sure she’s embarrassed by those days if she remembers them at all.

True, I don’t see her that often now just once every couple of months,

when she remembers she is supposed to stop by-and in that way, I guess you could say that even with the procedure I lost a little bit of her. But that’s not the point. The point is that she’s protected. The point is that she’s safe.

Part: 9

I’ll tell you another secret, this one for your good. You may think the past has something to tell you. You may think that you should listen, should strain to make out its whispers, should bend over backward, stoop down low to

hear its voice breathed up from the ground, from the dead places.

You may think there's something in it for you, something to understand or make sense of. But I know the truth: I know from the nights of Coldness.

I know the past will drag you backward and down, have you snatching at whispers of wind and the gibberish of trees rubbing together, trying to decipher some code, trying to piece together what was broken. It's hopeless. The past is nothing but a

weight. It will build inside of you like a stone.

Take it from me: If you hear the past speaking to you, feel it tugging at your back and running its fingers up your spine, the best thing to do is run. In the days that follow Maddie's confession, I check constantly for symptoms of the disease.

When I'm manning the register at my uncle's store I lean forward on my elbow, keep my hand resting on my cheek so I can crook my fingers back

toward my neck and count my pulse, making sure it's normal.

In the mornings I take long, slow breaths, listening for rasping or hitches in my lungs. I wash my hands constantly. I know the deliria isn't like a cold you can't get it from being sneezed on-but still, it's contagious, and when I woke up the day after our meeting at East End with my limbs still heavy and my head as light as a bubble and an ache in my throat that refused to go away, my first thought was that

I'd been infected. After a few days, I feel better.

The only weird thing is the way my senses seem to have dulled. Everything looks washed out, like a bad color copy. I have to load my food with salt before I can taste it, and every time my aunt speaks to me it seems like her voice has been muted a few degrees. But I read through 'The Book of Shhh- of life,' and all the recognized symptoms of deliria, and don't see anything that matches up, so in the end, I figure I'm safe. Still, I take

precautions, determined not to make one false step, determined to prove to myself that I'm not like my mother-that the thing with Ray was a fluke, a mistake, a horrible, horrible accident.

I can't ignore how close I was to danger. I don't even want to think about what would happen if anyone found out what she was if anyone knew that we had stood together shivering in the water, that we had talked, laughed, touched.

It makes me feel sick. I have to keep repeating to myself that my

procedure is less than two months away now.

All I have to do is keep my head down and make it through the next seven weeks and I'll be fine.

I come home every evening a full two hours before curfew. I volunteer to spend extra days at the store, and I don't even ask for my usual eight-dollar-an-hour wage.

Maddie doesn't call me. I don't call her, either. I help my aunt cook dinner, and I clean and wash the dishes unprompted.

Maggie is in summer school - she's only in first grade and they're already talking about holding her back- and every night I pull her onto my lap and help her sludge through her work, whispering in her ear, begging her to speak, to focus, to listen, cajoling her, finally, into writing at least half of the answers down in her workbook.

After a week, my aunt stops looking at me suspiciously whenever I walk into the house, stops demanding to know where I've been, and another weight eases off me: She trusts me

again. It wasn’t easy to explain why on earth she and I would decide on an impromptu swim in the ocean in our clothes, no less-just after a big family dinner, even harder to explain why I came home pale and shaking, and I could tell my aunt didn’t buy it. But after a while she relaxes around me again, stops looking at me distrustfully like I’m some caged-up animal she’s worried will go feral.

Days pass, time ticks away, seconds click forward like dominoes toppling in a line. Every day the heat

gets worse and worse. It creeps through the streets of Pitt., festers in the Dumpsters, makes the city smell like a giant armpit. The walls sweat and the trolleys cough and shudder, and every day people gather in front of the municipal buildings, praying for a brief blast of cold air whenever the mechanized doors swoosh open because a regulator or politician or guard has to go in and out.

I have to give up my runs. The last time I do a full loop outside I find that my feet carry me down to the

Square, past the Governor. The sun is a high white haze, all the buildings cut sharply against the sky like a series of metal teeth. By the time I make it to the statue

I'm panting, exhausted, and my head is spinning. When I grab the Governor's arm and swing myself up onto the statue's base, the metal burns underneath my hand and the world seesaws crazily, light zigzagging everywhere. I'm dimly aware that I should go inside, out of the heat, but my brain is all foggy and so there I go,

poking my fingers around the hole in the Governor's cupped fist. I don't know what I'm looking for. She already told me that the note he'd left for me months ago must have turned to a pulp by now. My fingers come out sticky, pieces of melting gum stringing between my thumb and forefinger, but still, I root around. And then I feel it slide between my fingers, cool and crisp, folded in a square: a note.

I'm half-delirious as I open it, but still, I don't expect it to be from her.

My hands begin to shake as I read:

Maddie, I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.

Your lover girl-

I don’t remember the run home, and my aunt finds me later half passed out in the hallway, murmuring to myself. She has to put me in a bathtub full of ice to get my temperature down. When I finally come too, I can’t find the note anywhere.

I realize I must have dropped it, and feel half-relieved and half-disappointed.

That evening we read that the Time and Temperature Building registered 102 degrees: the hottest day on record for the summer so far.

~*~

My aunt forbids me to run outside for the rest of the summer. I don't put up a fight. I don't trust myself, can't be sure my feet won't lead me back down to the Governor, to East End Beach up the coast, to the labs. I

receive a new date for the evaluations and spend my evenings in front of the mirror rehearsing my answers.

My aunt insists on accompanying me to the labs again, but this time I don’t see Hana. I don’t see anyone I recognize. Even the four evaluators are different: floating oval faces, different shades of brown and pink, two-dimensional, like shaded drawings. I am not afraid of this time. I don’t feel anything.

Part: 10

I answer all the questions exactly as I should. When I am asked to give my favorite color, for just the briefest, tiniest of seconds my mind flashes on a sky the color of polished silver, and I think I hear a word-gray-whispered quietly into my ear.

I say, ‘Blue,’ and everyone smiles. I say, ‘I’d like to study psychology and social regulation.’ I say, ‘I like to listen to music, but not too loudly.’ I say, ‘The definition of happiness is security.’ Smiles, smiles, smiles all around, a room full of teeth.

After I’m done, as I am leaving, I think I see a shifting shadow, a flicker in my peripheral vision. I glance up quickly at the observation deck. Of course, it’s empty.